

Region

EPA: asbestos dump no longer a hazard

By ROBERT GAVIN
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BILLERICA — Grass has been planted on the 15-acre mound that covers the former Johns-Manville asbestos dump at Iron Horse Park.

The grass was the last step in the \$1.1 million Superfund project that U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials say has eliminated the

Billerica

health threat once posed by exposed asbestos in the area.

According to Robert Ankstittus, the EPA on-site coordinator, the grass will prevent erosion of the topsoil and help maintain a protective cover that will last at least 50 years.

"As of Nov. 1, there is no health threat," Ankstittus said yesterday. "We have stabilized the threat to the public health and welfare."

Ankstittus yesterday led a tour of this hazardous waste site off of Pond Street and briefed reporters on the completion of the first phase of the EPA project.

Phase one, which took approximately three months to complete, was an emergency project to eliminate the danger of exposed asbestos to residents and employees of neighboring industries.

Inhaled asbestos fibers are known to cause cancer and lung disease.

The environmental agency has also authorized the expenditure of \$700,000 to study and formulate plans for long-term remedies at the waste site.

The landfill, owned by the Boston & Maine Railroad, was used from World War II until a few years ago. Johns-Manville, once the nation's leading manufacturer of asbestos products, leased the dump to dispose of its waste.

Johns-Manville filed bankruptcy about two years ago, seeking protection from the tens of thousands of lawsuits filed by parties seeking to recover damages they claim were caused by the company knowingly manufacturing and selling dangerous products.

Exactly how much asbestos is buried in the 15-acre landfill is unknown, but Ankstittus said it must be hundreds of thousands of cubic feet.

In the surrounding area alone, Ankstittus said, the agency removed some 11,000 cubic feet of asbestos materials — the equivalent of more than 500 truckloads.

The EPA also uncovered and removed a number of 55-gallon drums containing hazardous materials, including asbestos

and industrial solvents. Some of the barrels were wrapped in covers that said "Asbestos, a fine Manville product," according to Ankstittus.

He said that groundwater contamination, caused by the leaking solvents, has been confirmed. Additional groundwater and geological studies will be conducted when the EPA launches the next phase of the cleanup program.

But asbestos, a mineral that exists naturally, will not contaminate groundwater, Ankstittus said. Asbestos only poses a health threat when its fibers become airborne.

That is why accepted cleanup practices call for burying the material, rather than risking the release of fibers by transporting it. Testing showed that there was no asbestos in the air, according to Ankstittus.

EPA, using money available from the federal Superfund program, began the emergency measures after the presence of exposed asbestos was confirmed.

According to Ankstittus, it took 12- to 15-hour workdays, seven days a week, to meet the Nov. 1 deadline set for the project.

EPA capped the asbestos dump with a 30-inch cover: 12 inches of gravel and 18 inches of topsoil. Grass was planted to help prevent erosion of the topsoil.

The area was also posted as an asbestos dump and fenced off.

Massive project

Ankstittus said the cleanup was a massive project, which included about six acres bordering the known asbestos dump. EPA had no idea of the magnitude of the work needed until it began its survey of the area, examining it in chunks of 150 to 200 feet.

"It was a tough survey to the point where it had no logic to it," he said. "You couldn't write off anywhere in the study area without walking it or sampling it."

While the EPA knew an asbestos dump was on the property, Ankstittus said the agency was flabbergasted to discover asbestos in the surrounding area.

Parts of the access road was made of asbestos, he said, and the agency had to cap the road before it could bring trucks into the area.

In some cases, the asbestos materials were buried where they were found because moving them would have released fibers into the air, threatening residents and motorists on Pond Street, he said.

Ankstittus said those locations have been noted on property records.

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